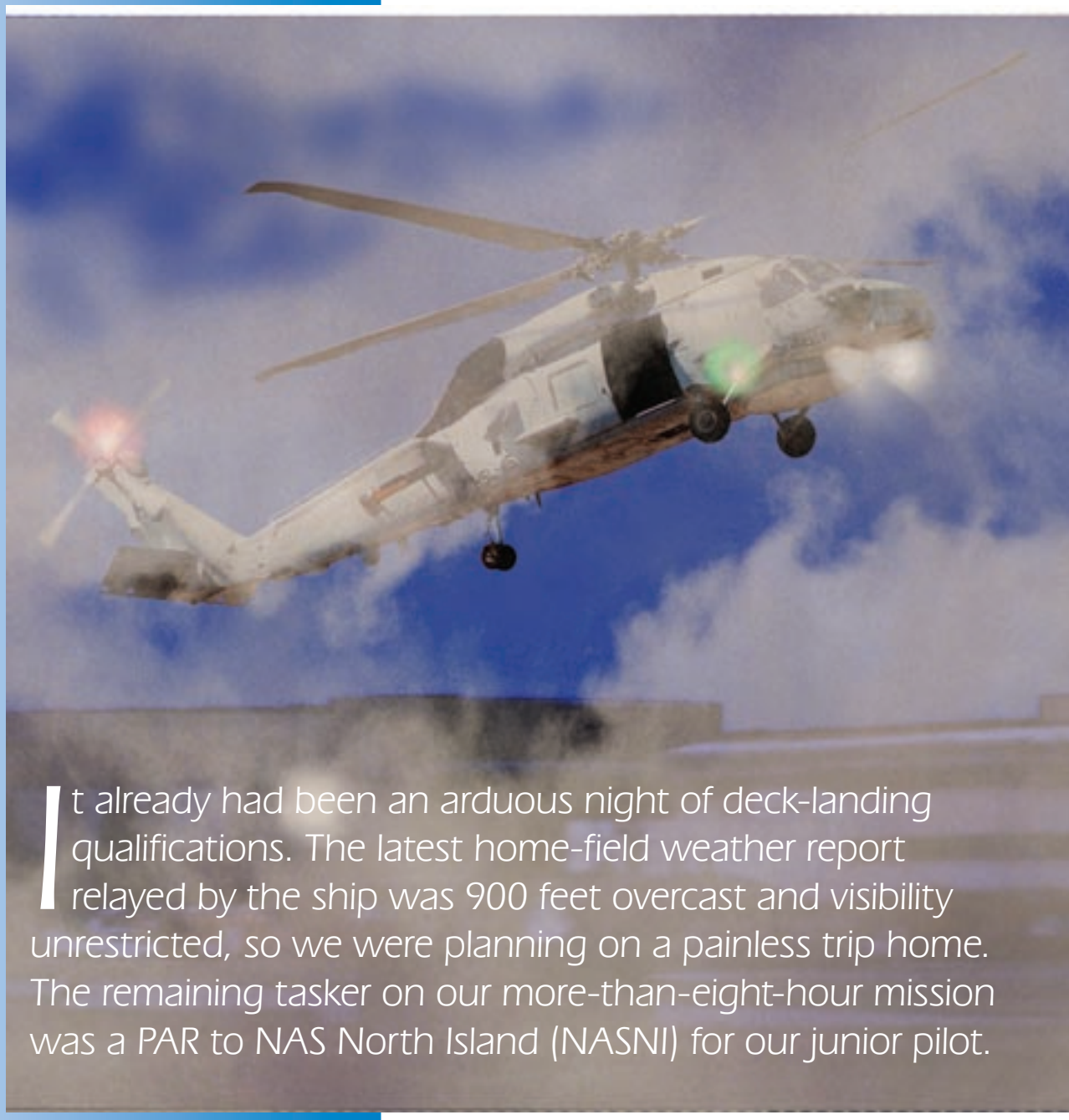

It already had been an arduous night of deck-landing qualifications. The latest home-field weather report relayed by the ship was 900 feet overcast and visibility unrestricted, so we were planning on a painless trip home. The remaining tasker on our more-than-eight-hour mission was a PAR to NAS North Island (NASNI) for our junior pilot.

My first clue something was amiss came when we checked in with SOCAL approach, and the controller responded with vectors for the GCA before I had requested one. Our second clue came moments later when a Southwest Airlines pilot reported a missed approach from Lindbergh field (only one mile from NASNI) and requested vectors to his alternate. I glanced at my copilot and said, "You know things aren't good when the big boys are missing."

One of our two radios was not working, so I asked SOCAL if I momentarily could go off frequency, with the intent to contact metro for weather. The harried controller replied NASNI tower was reporting 400 feet overcast with five-eighths-mile visibility in mist; they could not see the approach end of either runway, and visibility rapidly was degrading.

We checked in with the NASNI final controller for the straight-in GCA to runway 29. My copilot flew a superb approach, and, at 450 feet, I started to make out the runway-end lights slightly to our right. Feeling everything was coming together, I took the controls and reported the field in sight. I was a little surprised I'd

By LCdr. Kieran Twomey

missed the high-intensity lights and was even more surprised when the controller immediately switched us to tower. My copilot switched the only radio as I descended toward the approach lights, still wishing the GCA guy had continued controlling us all the way down as they do during VFR practice approaches. As the lights drew near, the picture started to clear. I was down to 200 feet, and the runway lights illuminated the sides of—warehouses!

I realized we were about 200 yards off course to the right of the runway. I instantly turned the helicopter to 180 degrees and climbed, in accordance with our missed-approach instructions. I sheepishly told tower I had "lost sight" of the runway and was executing the missed approach. We diverted to a field slightly inland and still VFR and landed without incident. My postflight analysis of the episode left me with some lasting impressions.

Never believe the last weather report. It's history, and, regardless of the source, it should be treated with great suspicion. I should have contacted metro, PMSV or FSS, to update the weather I had received from the ship while en route to my home field. A weather update would have given us a chance to brief the full approach and to discuss alternatives before we were thrown into the lion's den. Once you're inside the busy airspace with constant radio chatter and direction, you can't be too effusive with your brief.

Don't think you can take the controls in IMC conditions and fly a VFR scan to the deck. I never would have believed I would make this mistake with the hundreds of mishaps caused by it, but, there I was, trying to will myself into VMC when we still were IMC. If you don't have a visible horizon, you're not VMC—don't kid yourself.

Watch out for noise-abatement procedures. I've flown hundreds of approaches into this airport, and 99 percent of them have been offset for noise abatement. Everything I'm used to—the landmarks, the approach lights slightly off to my right, the need for a left turn on short final—is predicated on the offset approach. In actual IMC, the approach turns into a straight-in, and everything is different.

Don't be afraid to divert. The only thing scarier than this approach was the drive home in zero-zero conditions. The conditions degraded so rapidly that, 20 minutes after we had landed at our divert, we couldn't find the helicopter on the tarmac. One more approach at home field and we probably would have had to fly 70 miles to the desert.

Aside from a bruised ego and possibly waking up some guys at the North Island BOQ, no harm was done. The helicopter came home the next morning, and everyone slept in their beds that night. Next time, if I'm at decision height and don't know it's the runway, I'm logging more flight time.

LCdr. Twomey flew with HSL-47.